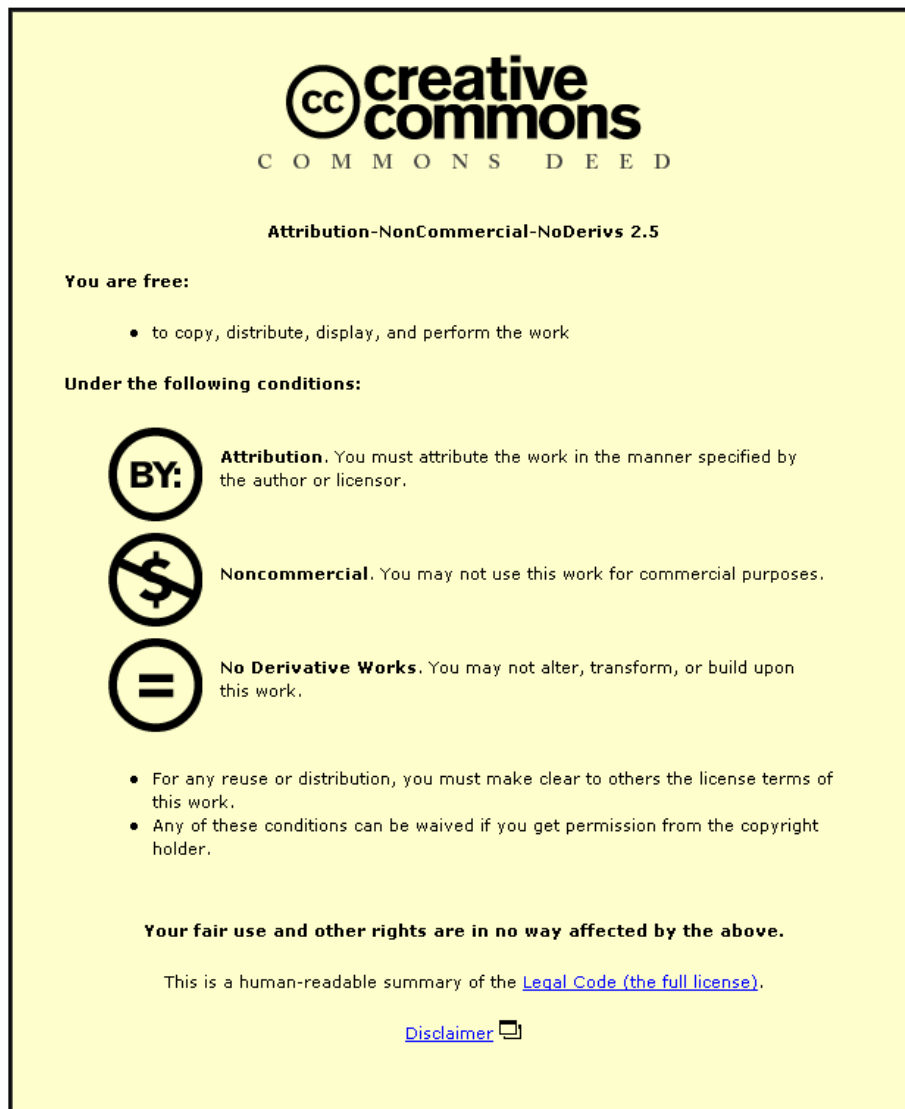


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Focus Group Follies? Qualitative Research and British Labour Party Strategy¹

Abstract: Media coverage of the contemporary British Labour party routinely suggests party leaders, notably Tony Blair, have been overly reliant on using focus group as a means of obtaining voter feedback. The paper explores this popular understanding by considering how and when qualitative forms of opinion research began to play a significant role in developing campaign strategy. Following their incorporation into party planning during the mid-1980s, focus groups provided an increasingly influential (and at the time more discreet) source of data and support for the leadership's Policy Review later that decade. Following the 1992 election defeat selective findings from the party's qualitative research programme became integral to the public relations' initiatives of Labour's self-styled 'modernisers', particularly in their largely successful attempt to delegitimise and then marginalise the role of the party's once formidable affiliated union supporters in internal affairs. Crucially this contributed to a climate that enabled the key moderniser Tony Blair to emerge and win the leadership.

Dr Dominic Wring
Department of Social Sciences
Loughborough University
LE11 3TU
E-mail D.J.Wring@lboro.ac.uk
Tel 00 44 (0)1509 228350
Fax 00 44 (0)1509 223944

Biography: Dominic Wring is this Journal's Associate Editor for Europe. He is also Vice-President of the International Association of Political Science's Research Committee on Political Communication and co-convenor of the United Kingdom Political Studies Association's Media and Politics Group

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Focus Groups and 'New' Labour.

It has become a journalistic truism that Tony Blair and 'new' Labour are obsessed or motivated by focus groups. This is perhaps understandable given the influential role of Blair's polling adviser Philip Gould in shaping party strategy. The latter's influence was discernible during the preparations up to the 1997 election when the campaign preparations were informed by NOP polling data and the 300 focus groups conducted by Gould. A further 70 were undertaken after the election was called (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997, 129-30). This feedback underpinned the entire plan contained in the party's so-called 'war book'. Its identified 'swing voters' included 'mortgage holders, younger, higher incomes' and reflected a guiding strategic assumption that the party should focus its greatest efforts on appealing to the middle-class or those aspiring to join it (Labour Party, 1997). The report noted other potential target groups such as women, people nervous about change and those less likely to vote and suggested campaign themes designed to contrast Labour with the Conservatives including leadership, attractive policies and 'something for all people'. The leadership's rhetorical emphasis on 'new' Labour helped offset perceived weaknesses identified in the report including public distrust of the 'hidden left', 'unions' and 'inexperience'. Blair attempted to counter these perceptions and the Conservative's 'New Labour, New Danger' slogan by pledging in the right-wing *Daily Mail* newspaper that he would keep the 'most restrictive' labour laws in the western world (*Daily Mail*, 26th March 1997). The manner and scale of the party's return to office muted criticism of this approach and appeared to vindicate the leadership's investment in a highly stylised professional campaign approach based at its new corporate style Millbank headquarters.

The importance of focus grouping to the new Prime Minister continued to excite journalistic attention throughout the government's first term. Philip Gould's largely secretive role and work as an advisor literally became front page news when several of his private memos to Blair were leaked to journalists with *The Times* and *Sun* and used by Conservative leader William Hague to attack Labour in parliament. It was somewhat ironic then that an editorial in the *Sun*, one of those media most feared by party strategists, should criticise Gould for a 'pessimism' derived in part from appeasing opinion-forming newspapers such as itself. In a revealing memo entitled 'Getting the Right Place in History and not the Wrong One', the adviser compared the 'new Labour brand has been badly contaminated', was out of touch with popular opinion and that there was 'no shared agreement about what is the new Labour project for government' (*Sun* 19th July 2000). The exposure and existence of such frank advice somewhat undermined and contradicted its counsel for strong, determined leadership. The perception of Blair as a vacillating, polling conscious politician had been

reinforced by his actions (or rather inaction) and nowhere more so than in his failure to persuade a largely sceptical electorate about his professed belief in the merits of the Euro in advance of a referendum on British membership of it. Now it was confirmed in a stark warning from an adviser who told the Prime Minister that his focus groups were indicating that 'He lacks conviction, he is all spin and presentation, he says things to please people, not because he believes them' (*The Sunday Times* 11th June 2000).

Gould's instinctive populism was reflected in his preference for taking 'tough' rather than 'soft' positions and being 'pro-family' to guard against losing the support of the 'mainstream majority' and 'middle Britain' to the Conservatives because: 'People feel (the government) has put asylum seekers first, has put Europe first and has put minorities first' (*The Sunday Times* 28th May, and 11th June 2000). His analysis resembled that of Downing Street aide Peter Hyman and Dick Morris, the strategist responsible for popularising the strategic concept of 'triangulation' during his time working for Bill Clinton's re-election. Morris argued democracy was an increasingly 'continuous' rather than representative process in which centre-left candidates needed to disavow 'ideological constructs' and realign themselves with their principal (i.e. right-wing) opponents, particularly on issues where the rivals had a lead (Morris, 1999). The thinking behind triangulation concept was not dissimilar to Downs' classic thesis on party competition and Dunleavy's later work on 'preference accommodation' (Downs, 1957; Dunleavy, 1991). Unlike Clinton Labour was comfortably ahead in the polls but this did not diminish the leadership's preoccupation with cultivating Conservative inclined floating voters going into the 1997 election. Yet this is far from the first time that those connected with the so-called 'new' Labour project have advocated the adoption a strategic approach similar to their 'new' Democrat cousins. This paper seeks to place the recent history, growing influence and role of focus groups within the wider leadership sponsored process of party reform. It suggests that whilst contemporary journalistic scepticism provides an important check on some of the political claims made on the basis of qualitative data analysis, this has not always been the case. Indeed it can be argued that certain media contributors have been complicit in endorsing the kinds of interpretations of public opinion studies favoured by the Labour leadership.

The Legacy of the Policy Review.

Campaigning played a significant role in changing and redistributing power within the Labour Party during the 1980s so that, by the end of the decade, the organisation was unrecognisable from the one defeated in 1979. Far from being about peripheral presentational exercises, the adoption of a marketing driven approach became integral to the leadership's reassertion of control. Furthermore this activity extended to influencing

popular opinion and was concerned with convincing the party of the need for reform. The Policy Review process of 1987-91 began a process of 'internal' marketing that culminated in the launch of 'new' Labour in 1994.

The function of 'agenda-setting' is central to understanding how the Review and subsequent leadership exercises were able to restructure the party. Cohen identified the core feature of this concept when he wrote: 'the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about' (Cohen, 1963). Having been popularised in a celebrated study of election campaigning, Lukes used the term to describe one of three 'faces' of power that determine organisational outcomes (Lukes, 1974). Others adopted the concept in studying Labour decision-making procedures during the 1970s and early 1980s, a period characterised by 'crisis management' and a determined attempt by grassroots' activists to diminish the power of the parliamentary leadership in order to reassert the right of the party Conference to make key decisions (Minkin, 1980; Koelble, 1991). The body, labelled the 'parliament of the movement' by former leader and Prime Minister Clement Attlee, provided a delegatory form of self-governance embodying a commitment to internal democracy (Drucker, 1979). This quality, largely absent from the other main parties, state institutions and most media organisations, helps explain Labour's historic distrust of the latter in particular. Significantly the modern party's embrace of marketing has afforded the media considerable influence over internal Labour affairs with important consequences for what remained of the organisation's federal, participatory structures.

To better understand the changed nature of party organisation it is vital to consider the increasingly central role played by three 'auxiliary' institutions in shaping and determining decision-making outcomes. Firstly, and most importantly, there has been the growth in size and importance of what Panebianco calls the 'electoral professionals' responsible for implementing and, increasingly, devising strategy (Ostrogorski, 1902; Panebianco, 1988). With the emergence of this elite there has been a parallel growth in the party's reliance on another auxiliary in the form of a select group of external media contacts. In return for privileged access, these journalistic outlets have been responsible for the conduit of leadership viewpoints to general as well as internal party publics. This is not a new phenomenon given it was Michels who at the beginning of the 20th Century made the telling observation: 'The press constitutes a potent instrument for the conquest, the preservation and the consolidation of power on the part of the leaders' (Michels, 1962). Finally, in terms of the input side to the debate, there has been an increasing preoccupation on the part of the electoral

professionals with floating voters. Their attitudes, as determined by polling research, guided the leadership, its advisers and media contacts to the extent that this 'opinion electorate' of potential Labour supporters has in effect manifested itself as another potent force (Panebianco, 1988).

Empowering the Electoral Professionals.

During the Policy Review the media helped the leadership dominate the party agenda. By doing so Labour was reconstituted as a more hierarchical, professional organisation. Phil Kelly, the editor of *Tribune*, speculated on such an outcome at the beginning of the Review:

'If it becomes a mass party which takes its membership seriously, and involves them in policy-making and implementation, then it will need a system of internal management based on consensus. If it descends into a media-orientated marketing organisation for top politicians, then it will need internal discipline which will make the fifties seem liberal by comparison.' (*Tribune*, 2nd September 1988)

Prior to the late 1980s party agenda setting was understood to mean an ability to influence policy and organisational decisions through the mobilisation of internal opinion. The increased importance of marketing complicated the process by intensifying politicians' reliance on the mass media as a vehicle for persuasion. This in turn eroded the power of previously influential horizontal decision-making structures such as the Annual Conference. Given its already privileged position, a Labour leader with coherent strategies now became virtually unassailable not least because:

'His office now housed an unprecedented proliferation of aides, assistants and advisers, with an overview of, and involvement in, all aspects of party activity and all dimensions of the links with the unions. In effect there was now an Executive Office of the Leader... (providing) the basis of a centralised power structure unique in Labour Party history.' (Minkin, 1992, 630)

The incumbent leader Neil Kinnock's burgeoning 'executive' was funded by the parliamentary subsidy of 'Short Money' paid to opposition parties to enable them to fund research (Webb, 1994). The beneficiaries of this resource were the personal aides, marketing consultants and Campaigns Director who formed what Shaw calls the 'strategic community'. Increasingly it was these advisers, rather than those elected to the now largely titular National Executive Committee, who directed party affairs. An obvious manifestation of this was the growing prominence and perceived importance of so-called 'spin' and 'spin doctors' (Shaw, 1994, 57-9).

Targeting the Media.

The marketing conscious Review process involved targeting non-electoral groups including party members, donors and affiliates with an interest in policy and organisational developments (Shama, 1976; Kotler and Kotler, 1999). The leadership was uniquely placed to co-ordinate a sustained public relations effort designed to influence internal audiences with the help of external media 'opinion formers'. Unlike conventional politics, intra-party debates offer particular opportunities as well as challenges:

'The mixture of intimacy and opposition is conducive to tensions, but when the interactions and relationships are distilled and exaggerated into news reports, the mixture is doubly explosive. Immediate relations are refracted through the prism of media publicity, itself often clothed in extravagant gladiatorial imagery.' (Tiffen, 1989, 162)

Before the Policy Review Labour agenda setting centred on influencing Conference and NEC decisions in tandem with a mediated debate which flourished in left journals like *Tribune*, *New Statesman* or the in-house *Labour Weekly* and *New Socialist*. The latter two publications' closure was symptomatic of the leadership's concentration on the anti-Conservative *Guardian* and *Daily Mirror* newspapers for the dissemination of their reformist ideas from the late 1980s onwards. During this time both papers, and contributors like *Mirror* political editor Alastair Campbell and *Guardian* correspondent Patrick Wintour in particular, were invariably supportive of Kinnock's leadership and their advocacy helped frame broadcast media coverage of internal party matters. The importance of these papers stems from their circulation figures: throughout the early 1990s these titles' readerships both outnumbered the estimated Labour membership of 300-350,000. Their organisational significance became obvious given an estimated 35% of those belonging to the party read the *Guardian*, 27% the *Mirror/Record*, 7% the *Independent*, 15% others and only 13% no daily (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992, 37). The two most popular papers were thus able to each reach a larger audience than the combined strength of the main Labour supporting publications *Tribune*, *New Statesman*, *Labour Briefing*, *Chartist* and *Socialist/Red Pepper*. The latter group's tendency to be more critical of the leadership than their mass-market rivals once mattered because of their opinion-forming, activist readerships yet their potential agenda-setting influence waned as the party abandoned its representative democratic structures in favour of membership ballots for parliamentary selections, leadership elections and constitutional or policy referenda.

Researching the Opinion Electorate.

Private polling, that is opinion research commissioned by parties, is not new to British politics. Nevertheless the importance attached to this form of data as a source of feedback was borne out by the increase in the amount as well as types of study being commissioned during the 1980s. Parties that previously relied on quantitative opinion research methods such as the large-scale questionnaire now began funding ongoing qualitative studies of voter attitudes, typically in the form of a focus groups consisting of 6 to 10 people sharing a weak partisanship and/or similar socio-economic background. In such sessions a trained moderator would facilitate a recorded discussion aimed at exploring participants' deeper value and attitudinal structures. Qualitative findings increasingly complemented quantitative electoral analysis because, as Neil Kinnock put it, they helped to 'get behind the figures' (Kavanagh, 1995, 145). Parties have long used such research in their electioneering work. The inter-war Conservatives held cottage coffee mornings to target women voters whilst Labour did the same through impromptu back street meetings. Though primarily propagandist in intent, both offered potentially valuable feedback. In the 1960s so-called depth interviewing of individual voters became a feature of campaigns. Labour used the method to copy test advertisements in 1964. A decade later leader Harold Wilson demonstrated his belief in the value of polling by commissioning so-called 'psychographic' based analysis from the party's researchers MORI. Interest in qualitative techniques intensified during the 1980s with their use by Conservative strategists and the Save the Greater London Council campaign. Even the chaotic 1983 Labour campaign involved some focus groupings.

Labour's use of qualitative research escalated during the mid-1980s with the succession of Neil Kinnock to the leadership. Leslie Butterfield and Paul Southgate of advertisers Abbott Mead Vickers together with SRU's Roddy Glenn presented their focus group based findings at a November 1985 meeting of an embryonic group of party sympathisers working in the marketing industry. The then newly recruited Philip Gould was particularly impressed by the way the data and analysis highlighted the apparent disparity between popular attitudes and Labour's perceived association with high tax, unilateralism and nationalisation (Gould, 1998, 50-54). Voters liked choice and were 'completely divorced' from the 'a minority agenda of the emerging metropolitan left, of militant rights in welfare, race and gender'. Younger women were worried about society breaking down and appeared introspective and primarily concerned about their families. The researchers concluded 'everybody wants to be middle-class these days'. Gould was instrumental in formalising the relationship between Labour and its professional marketing supporters and to this end co-ordinated the Shadow Communications Agency of sympathetic expert advisors.

Early SCA research indicated there was significant voter antipathy towards so-called 'scroungers' and, by implication, Labour policies devoted to helping them. In his first major qualitative based study for the party, Philip Gould argued its 'minority agenda' was a major electoral handicap (Gould, 1998, 49-50). Consequently the subsequent 1986 Freedom and Fairness campaign was tailored to appeal to the burgeoning aspirational electorate. The strategy for this was outlined to at a SCA presentation on the topic of 'Society and Self'. The Agency's message was not universally welcomed. Tony Benn was particularly alarmed by the meeting: 'Labour was associated with the poor, the unemployed, the old, the sick, the disabled, pacifists, immigrants, minorities and the unions, and this was deeply worrying'. Benn was further troubled by what he saw as the proposed remedy of Thatcher style leadership: 'I came out feeling physically sick; I'm not kidding I felt unwell, because if this is what the Labour Party is about I've got nothing whatever in common with it'. Significantly alternative understandings or contradictory findings from the research data were invariably 'filtered' out of discussions (Benn, 1992, 442; Shaw, 1994, 63).

The subsequent Policy Review ensured selected material from focus groups of floating voters became integral to debate because, according to Kinnock, the process had to be 'reinforced periodically by using the Shadow Communications Agency to give presentations which...assisted in the efforts to sustain the movement of the Review in the desired direction' (Shaw, 1995). It helped that Communications Director Peter Mandelson had an understanding and interest in focus grouping arising from his time with television's influential current affairs programme *Weekend World* in the early 1980s. Speaking in December 1987 Mandelson used qualitative research material to argue Labour was out of touch and associated with 'strange things', 'Marxists' and 'gays' (*The Times*, 6th December 1987; Macintyre, 1999, 74). During the actual Review process opinion research based analysis was made available to those involved in the various policy group discussions. Certain findings were particularly influential, notably the feedback suggesting large numbers of potential supporters discriminated between a 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Labour's continued association with the latter implied traditional social democratic thinking or 'Croslandism' was now outmoded according to a key account of the period (Hughes and Wintour, 1990, 137-38 and 153).

The 'Modernising' Agenda.

The fourth consecutive defeat in 1992 triggered a further period of introspection within the Labour movement. The supporters of Kinnock launched a determined defence of his reform strategy during the immediate post-

mortem period and beyond. In doing so they used public relations and selective opinion research findings to influence the debate over the party's future. Brivati identified the two issues that defined their position:

'The British Labour Party has a long memory and a conservative nature. There are two key elements in its conservatism which have been the subject of controversy over the last thirty years and which the current leadership would like, in an ideal world, to reform. The first is the link with the trade unions, particularly the block vote system. The second is Clause IV of the Party's constitution. Both are retained because of their historical importance rather than their contemporary relevance, and the modernisers in the party feel they are an obstacle to winning power.' (Brivati, 1993)

The so-called 'modernisers' scored a notable coup by appropriating a name that had been fought over since the early stages of the Policy Review. That they were able to do so was largely a result of the intensely mediated nature of modern internal party debates. Like them, the modernisers' journalistic sympathisers characterised their opponents as 'traditionalists', a negative term most in the party associated with conservatism. Unsurprisingly many of those designated as such did not like or use the name and claimed it was they who were the authentic radicals with a modernising agenda (Hain, 1993a). Nevertheless the print and broadcast media discourse couched the debate in terms of modernisers versus traditionalists, thereby giving the former added credibility. Yet the terms were misleading if not meaningless as few Labour partisans were not prepared to countenance policy and organisational changes (Elliott, 1993). To use more conventional terminologies, the debate was largely constructed through the mass media according to terms governed by a publicity conscious grouping on what can be termed the party's 'new right' (*Tribune*, 21st July 1995). Significantly this faction differed from their Gaitskellite forebears as well as their contemporaries on the traditional Labour right in that its political identity was not based on conventional social democrat orthodoxies nor founded upon trade union backing. Rather the new right wanted to transform the party by forging an electoral alliance based on middle class supporters, an accommodation with free market capitalism and the espousal of a rhetoric more commonly associated with the Conservatives. By adopting the title of modernisers they effectively neutralised their main rivals' ability to claim the mantle of the 'left' against their own less attractive but arguably more accurate 'right' label. This proved an asset in a succession of debates, be they constitutional and concerned with the union link and Clause Four or more specific and related to events like the American Democrats' 1992 electoral victory or the unexpected leadership contest of 1994.

End of the Unions?

The 1992 election ended Neil Kinnock's leadership but not what he had come to regard as 'the project' (Kinnock, 1994). In discussing the defeat most of his party rivals avoided attacking Kinnock personally and preferred to focus on the role played by the Shadow Communications Agency, a key agent of his reform strategy. The SCA was, however, spared some criticism when this muted post-mortem was diverted by an 'extraordinary fixation' with the union link 'on the part of an influential minority who had important prompters and allies in the media' (Minkin, 1992, 678). Behind this sustained attack was a straightforward calculation:

'Labour's social democrats used to argue that the block vote was a democratic measure representative of trade union opinion. But once the union block vote swung against them, they complained that it was undemocratic and unrepresentative. Perspectives change according to whether a practice helps a group win a struggle with challenges or not.' (Koelble, 1991, 126-7)

Consequently, within days of the defeat, former Campaigns Directorate official Colin Byrne alleged 'behind the scenes fixing' involving unnamed trade unionists who had long sought to undermine Kinnock (*The Guardian*, 13th April 1992). This coincided with reports that several general secretaries were supporting John Smith for the leadership. Media attention turned to these affiliates' role and the resulting coverage was almost entirely hostile. An *Independent* editorial denounced the party-union link as 'constitutionally wrong' whilst a *Sunday Times* feature by Andrew Grice warned of 'The Red Barons Return' (*The Independent*, 13th April 1992; *The Sunday Times*, 19th April 1992). The unions were also accused of being 'rooted in the past', 'undemocratic', a source of 'extremism' and having 'cloth cap' images (*The Times*, 19th May 1992; *The Independent*, 19th May 1992; *The Independent*, 12th June 1992). The myth of the monolithic 'barons' was a persistent feature of journalistic reports but took no account of a more complex reality in which the affiliated unions were frequently divided over many issues (Minkin, 1992).

Discussion over the union link began to dominate Labour's post-mortem and thwarted a sustained reappraisal of Kinnock's reform strategy. Leaked findings from the party's own private focus groups furthered the anti-union media agenda. Reports from sympathisers like Donald Macintyre reinforced the new right's case: 'Labour lost the election because floating voters saw it as union-dominated and outdated and because they believed voting for it was not in their financial self-interest, according to confidential post-election research circulating in the party's high command' (*The Independent on Sunday*, 3rd May 1992). Similarly Patrick Wintour of *The Guardian* wrote about 'devastating' feedback which suggested the party was 'too old fashioned, too tied to the past, too linked to minorities and old images of the trades unions'; the latter were

blamed for offering 'an old fashioned, bureaucratic image (to) key suburban swing voters' (*The Guardian*, 12th June 1992;. Other opinion forming papers reinforced the rapidly emerging consensus that Labour was 'backward-looking' and identified with 'industrial strife', 'the winter of discontent', 'inflation and economic failure', 'heavy industry', 'the traditional working class', 'the past', 'downwardly mobile' and 'minority groups'. It was argued that the 'union interest' reinforced these negative associations (*The Independent*, 18th June 1992; *The Financial Times*, 18th June 1992; *The Guardian*, 20th June 1992). At the behest of Philip Gould, Alastair Campbell contributed a likeminded article to the *Daily Mirror*; Campbell would of course later become a key lieutenant in the Blair leadership (Gould,1998,p.159). Shadow Cabinet and NEC member Clare Short suspected the leaks were being used to divert attention away from the SCA's flawed campaign strategy and, somewhat bizarrely, it was left to the Conservative supporting *Daily Telegraph* to point out the benefits of the party union link (*Daily Telegraph*, 22nd June 1992). Stuart Weir detected an orchestrated attempt to scapegoat Labour's founding allies:

'During the election, the Conservatives tried to make Labour's links with the trade unions into an electoral issue and failed. None of the polls picked up any signs of the trade unions damaging Labour's rosy image, and the first post-mortems by specialist writers entirely disregarded them. But within a few weeks a highly influential group *within* the Labour Party had rewritten history. They firmly identified the trade unions as the root cause of the electorate's distrust of Labour - apparently as the first stage of a campaign to break the party/trade union connection.' (Weir,1992)

The immediate post-mortem failed to seriously address other possible negatives such as the so-called 'Kinnock factor'. This was a notable omission given the presidential nature of modern campaigning combined with this leader's widely recognised unpopularity with voters. This self-denial had, however, been unofficial policy as Philip Gould had consistently suppressed damning public feedback on Kinnock's performance in successive strategic presentations out of loyalty to the leader (Gould, 1998, 144). By contrast Gould showed no such reluctance in using a memo to apportion blame to those identified in the media post-mortem on the fourth defeat. For him the 'polling was clear': Labour was still a party of the 'past' (Gould, 1998, 158). By contrast the official party report on the election, published the same month, was more cautious but came too late to influence the debate over the link. It did however indicate that barely 7% of voters had mentioned unions as a reason for not supporting Labour. The more common explanations given were general party image (30%); economic competence and tax (20%); Major and Kinnock (20%); and tax on its own (10%).

And whereas the British Election Study devoted attention to all four of these concerns, the unions' role in the outcome hardly rated any sustained analysis in the book (Labour Party, 1992; Heath et al., 1994).

One more heave? The leadership of John Smith.

The convincing victory of the leading traditional right-winger John Smith in the 1992 leadership election underlined how much the party had changed in a decade. Smith's consensual style contrasted with that of his more frenetic predecessor. This was a reflection of his personality but also of the enormous powers bequeathed to him by Kinnock. Smith moved quickly to disband the Shadow Communications' Agency and replaced it with a more formalised client-firm partnership. In 1993 the party appointed former SCA volunteer Leslie Butterfield's BDDH as its advertisers. The agency assumed a relatively low profile in an arrangement designed to make the firm more accountable to the National Executive rather than the leadership. To this end Smith allowed his senior colleagues ready access to the party's private opinion research where Kinnock had continually restricted the circulation of this material. This did not, however, dramatically change a strategic outlook that still remained in the view of seasoned observer David McKie wedded to 'targeting middle income and Middle England' (*The Guardian* 29th April 1994).

Labour enjoyed a period of relative calm and unity during John Smith's leadership. The re-elected Conservatives were soon besieged by crises arising from the European Rate Mechanism debacle and the government's controversial mine closure programme. Labour's new right became agitated by what they perceived to be the leader's 'one more heave' strategy despite having supported his candidacy against the more obviously radical Bryan Gould. Journalistic sympathisers such as Andrew Grice and Martin Kettle acted as conduits for the group's view on Smith's performance by focusing on his alleged unwillingness to give a lead in what was now a heavily centralised party (*Sunday Times*, 22nd November 1992; *The Guardian*, 3rd December 1992). Yet the leader's relaxed approach also enabled the new right to dominate the internal agenda and attract considerable media coverage for articles like the provocatively entitled 'Sleep Walking to Oblivion' (Raynsford, 1992). In advocating further change, the group's cause was to be further galvanised by a seismic political event overseas.

The 'Clintonisation' of Labour: the electoral post-mortem by proxy.

The debate over Labour's defeat was initially side tracked into a manufactured but politically expedient row over the union link and in effect postponed the post-mortem. This changed with Bill Clinton's victory in the US presidential election of November 1992.

The 'New' Democrats.

Bill Clinton's victory enabled the so-called 'New' Democrats to promote their agenda for government. Their origins lay in the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council set up following the 1984 presidential election defeat. The DLC believed their party had to shed its perceived 'tax and spend' image in order to establish a reputation for financial rectitude but critics feared this would consolidate the economic orthodoxy being established under Reagan (Ferguson and Rogers, 1986). These Democrats also associated themselves with a less liberal penal agenda and developed policies to combat anti-social behaviour. In the run-up to the 1992 election Clinton underlined his own moral conservatism as Governor of Arkansas by executing a mentally incapacitated murderer. His subsequent victory inspired Labour's new right in a way their party's fourth defeat had not. Links had been forged when several headquarters' staff visited the United States to support the Democrats' campaign. Former SCA co-ordinator Philip Gould also experienced the election and identified what he believed were the campaign's key lessons for Labour. Media reports interpreted them as the proposed 'Clintonisation' of the party (*The Guardian*, 6th November 1992). Gould lauded the Democrats' rebuttal of the Republicans claims about their tax policies and argued Labour's inability to do likewise was a key failing of the 1992 campaign despite having advocated the need for a 'rapid reactions unit' in 1985 in his earliest report for the party (Gould, 1998, 55). Gould was fulsome in his praise of Clinton's key strategist James Carville and his flexible 'war room' which ensured quick responses to opposition claims. The Democrats' strategic clarity was enshrined in Carville's phrase 'It's the Economy, Stupid'.

The Labour new right's agenda was furthered by a conference on 'Clinton Economics' held at the beginning of 1993. The event featured Clinton strategists, American trade unionists and other analysts. Pollster Stanley Greenberg explained the campaign had aimed to broaden the Democrats' class appeal, emphasise the economy and sustain a critique of the government. Strategist Paul Begala spoke of how: 'Clinton's genius was to understand that the Democratic Party did not operate on a Left/Right basis and he changed the nature of the dialogue to that of between the old and the new, between elitism and populism' (Transport & General Workers' Union et al., 1993). Several British commentators argued the Americans offered Labour a blueprint for abandoning its image as 'a party of the poor and the past' by embracing the 'working middle-classes'

(*Independent on Sunday*, 3rd January 1993; *The Sunday Times*, 10th January 1993). Philip Gould and Patricia Hewitt launched the new right's own journal *Renewal* with a widely reported article entitled 'Lessons from America'. It suggested Labour needed to follow the Democrats lead by divesting itself of its 'tax and spend' image in order to develop a reputation for economic trustworthiness in order to win more middle-class voters (Gould and Hewitt, 1993). The analysis, presented as something original, was in reality little different to that offered in the aftermath of the 1987 defeat. More novel, but less commented upon, were the observations from some of the party officials who had worked on the Democrats' campaign (Braggins et al., 1993). Following Clinton's victory the leading Labour new right-wingers Gordon Brown and Tony Blair began visiting Washington to meet Democratic colleagues and Shadow Cabinet members began discussing fashionable American books like 'Reinventing Government' and its promotion of the 'enabling state' (*The Guardian*, 9th January 1993). Shadow Home Secretary Blair cited the communitarian ideas of Amitai Etzioni and others associated with Clinton in formulating a 'new' political agenda. He argued debates about major themes such as state versus market provision tended to overshadow the need for individuals to recognise they had responsibilities as well as rights and this informed Blair's more socially authoritarian 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' rhetoric (Blair, 1993).

The Politics of Focus Grouping.

Qualitative research methods became a more prominent feature of electoral analysis after the opinion polls' had failed to predict the outcome of the 1992 general election. Both politicians and journalists became increasingly interested in focus group data as an apparently scientific type source of some authority. Labour MP Giles Radice, a long time supporter of Kinnock's reform strategy, used the results of focus groups to explore public attitudes towards the party. His autumn 1992 pamphlet *Southern Discomfort* drew on findings based upon discussions involving voters from five Tory held marginal seats in south eastern England (Radice, 1992). Participants had all intended to support Labour in the recent election but ultimately opted for the Conservatives. These people were seen as particularly important because, in effect, they counted twice: the impact of losing one of their votes would be doubled if they supported the opposition. The *Southern Discomfort* focus group evidence suggested these voters perceived the party to be out of touch, extremist, supportive of high taxation and antagonistic to their aspirations. It usefully reinforced the impression created by the research findings leaked in the aftermath of the defeat which is hardly surprising given the firm of Philip Gould and his colleague Deborah Mattinson were responsible for conducting both pieces of research on which the analysis was based (Gould Mattinson Associates, 1992). Radice departed from the findings to

argue for the repeal of Clause Four of the party constitution, which embodied a commitment to public ownership, as a way of demonstrating that the 'new Labour party' was serious about change. This call, not to mention selected contents of the pamphlet, gained widespread coverage in the media (for example, *The Times*, 28th September 1992).

The findings of *Southern Discomfort* were broadly endorsed in a confidential briefing from party Campaigns Director David Hill. The contents of Hill's leaked memo received considerable press attention when it appeared at the height of the Clintonisation debate. His focus group based analysis offered further support to the new right case; this was understandable given the alleged source of the leak was Peter Mandelson. Philip Gould also later admitted to having also passed material to the *Sunday Times* during this time following encouragement from Tony Blair. For his part Mandelson had apparently obtained his documentation from NEC members Blair and Gordon Brown and passed it to his longstanding contact Patrick Wintour of *The Guardian* (Gould, 1998, 187; Macintyre, 1999, 240). The subsequent front page scoop, headlined 'Losers' verdict divides Labour' and 'Leaked memo warns of voters' distrust', went on to suggest voters felt the party was too beholden to the poor, minorities and other vulnerable groups (*The Guardian*, 5th January 1993). Wintour and likeminded journalists were keen to discuss the party's credibility 'problem' at a time when it was enjoying a near record 20% lead in the polls. It was ironic that the 'modernisers' should accuse their 'traditionalist' opponents of being backward looking whilst simultaneously arguing that divisive events a decade ago were to blame for Labour's predicament.

The partial results of leaked focus groups produced skewed analysis around a narrow range of issues because, as critic John Prescott saw it: 'a political agenda can be pursued through the kind of answers you get in a poll which are reflecting the way a question is put' ('Walden', broadcast on Independent Television network, 24th January 1993). Others noted the absence of any significant commentary on Neil Kinnock's role given his perceived unpopularity and past 'inconsistency over positions' (*Tribune*, 15th January 1993). No sustained discussion of the leader's performance featured in Gould Mattinson Associates' research for the *Southern Discomfort* study despite several participants having voluntarily mentioned Kinnock in response to a query about their attitudes towards the party (Gould Mattinson Associates, 1992). By contrast there was no shortage of commentary on other aspects of the qualitative findings and this, together with almost uniform interpretation of the leaked research, hindered alternative understandings of voter opinion. Most commentators failed to note that each successive instalment of focus group findings had in fact added

comparatively little and that the only novelty was provided by the sensationalism and degree of 'spin' in the reporting of evidence.

Aside from the issue of data misrepresentation in the reporting of already selective findings, the inherent limitations of focus group methods and results were not acknowledged or discussed. This did not stop political debate becoming saturated and distorted by choice quotes originating from qualitative studies. The simplification of findings for media consumption obscured a more complex reality. Reports also neglected the psychological dynamics inherent within focus grouping in that Radice's and the party's leaked research involved a narrow sample of Labour inclined but ultimately Conservative voters living in marginal seats.² Quite apart from the ability of the moderator to bias the discussion, these participants shared a need to justify and post-rationalise their decision to change allegiance during the 1992 election. Furthermore following a pattern established before and during the Policy Review, much of the commentary reported from these groups was negative about Labour. This animosity was interpreted as being exclusively aimed at the party rather than a wider (and widely mistrusted) political elite that included the Conservative government (on this support see Devine, 1992, 189).

Marginalising the 'Traditionalists'.

Partial reports of focus group research findings continued to influence the parameters of the debate over the party's future re-ignited by the Democrats' victory. Though they avoided using the term, those supportive of so-called 'Clintonisation' had a clear objective: 'The outbreak of public skirmishing over the relevance to Labour of Mr. Bill Clinton's US election victory is really coded debate about the extent to which the party must address the values and prejudices of the middle classes'. For John Prescott this was part of an ongoing 'battle for the soul of the Labour Party' underway against those 'obsessed with image rather than ideological conviction' (*Financial Times*, 11th January 1993). The most thorough statement of the left position was contained in Peter Hain's pamphlet *What's Left* which contended the trade union movement was a defensible 'vested interest' and criticised the Labour new right's devotion to mass mediation at the expense of a Gramscian style political education programme designed to combat alienation (Hain, 1993b). Hain further argued the consequence of such activities would result in the party's further detachment from its core working-class constituency and, by extension, the disenfranchisement these people from the democratic

² For a defence of political focus grouping by a researcher involved in the original *Southern Discomfort* study see Cooper, 1993. Criticisms are offered by Gaber, 1996; and Mitofsky, 1996. For more general methodological discussion see Morrison, 1998; and Wilkinson, 1998.

system. And to this end the Clinton victory was crucial in that, according to Clare Short, it was being used 'to get rid of our old values, be embarrassed about the unions, and don't talk about the poor' (*The Independent*, 11th January 1993).

The trade unions' potentially influential role in opposing Labour's new right had inspired the mediated attacks on them following the fourth defeat. Their legitimacy came under renewed scrutiny in the reporting of a special NEC Review Group convened to discuss the party union link over the summer. The committee's initially cautious suggestions were opposed by the new right and subsequently dismissed by *The Guardian* editorial as a 'shabby compromise' in favour of minority interests (*The Guardian*, 30th November 1992). Debate intensified throughout 1993 and culminated in John Smith's proposed 'One Member, One Vote' for parliamentary candidate selections and leadership elections. OMOV would remove the collective right of union branches to participate in these contests. Smith together with unexpected support from the previously sceptical John Prescott forced change in what amounted to 'a symbolic assertion of the will of the party modernisers, directed at the electorate. Conducted in the rhetoric of democracy and modernization, the debate maximized the apparent independence of the party from the unions' (Lovenduski and Norris, 1994). The narrow margin of victory was helped by the increased voting strength of individual Conference delegates not to mention the continuously anti-union agenda setting in those newspapers favoured by Labour members. The growing influence of the media over the party's internal affairs would be further demonstrated in an unexpected leadership contest.

Recapturing the Party: the New Right Triumphs.

Following John Smith's death Tony Blair emerged as the frontrunner to be his successor. Blair's rise to prominence had begun under Neil Kinnock and was greatly helped by Communications Director Peter Mandelson's deployment of him as a television spokesperson (Sopel, 1995, 59-62, and 92). The importance of this work was noted in a sympathetic profile that acknowledged how unnamed Blair's critics portrayed him as 'a lightweight, just a creation of the Labour's marketing team' (*The Guardian*, 1st March 1993). Yet such media recognition proved invaluable in establishing his leadership credentials.

The 1994 Leadership Election.

With mourning Labour politicians refusing to comment on the succession, Sarah Baxter of the *Evening Standard* filled the vacuum by becoming the first of many Westminster based journalists to make the case for 'the Labour politician the Tories fear most'. This was followed up by endorsements from media opinion formers including Trevor Kavanagh of *The Sun*, Simon Heffer in the *Daily Mail*, *News of the World* columnist Woodrow Wyatt, Martin Kettle of *The Guardian*, and Andrew Rawnsley in *The Observer* (Ali, 1994). BBC reporter Steve Richards detected signs of a heavy 'spin' in, as well as on, this and similar features: 'The reports of Blair heading for an easy win were obviously based on little more at that early stage than a desire by most newspaper editors and political correspondents for such an outcome'. Opinion polling evidence reinforced the perception that he was the prospective leader most likely to ensure a Labour victory at the next election (Richards, 1995). The press amplified this message:

'The media made a massive contribution to giving Blair a headstart over his rivals... The official moratorium in declarations of candidatures left the field entirely free for the media, in which Blair immediately emerged as a clear favourite. The advantage Blair obtained from this early endorsement cannot be overstated; his cause had a virtually unstoppable momentum before nominations even opened. The apparent certainty of his victory attracted contributions from donors who regarded his leadership campaign as part of a wider campaign for a Labour general election victory.' (Alderman, 1995).

When the official race began Blair, the new right candidate, could boast over half the parliamentary party as supporters and campaign contributions amounting to £88,000. His centre-left rivals Margaret Beckett and John Prescott received fewer endorsements and only collected £17,000 and £13,000 respectively. The electoral college involving approximately 400 MPs and MEPs, a few hundred thousand party members and

four million union and socialist society affiliates meant most participants would receive their information through the media rather than at party hustings. This further advantaged the early frontrunner and weakened potential rival Robin Cook who was dismissed as lacking telegenic, voter friendly qualities. Blair's 482 appearances in national newspaper reports during the crucial weeks prior to the official race also dwarfed the 182 of nearest rival Gordon Brown and discouraged the latter from standing (Franklin and Larsen, 1994). The Blair campaign was organised by Jack Straw, Mo Mowlam and Peter Kilfoyle with discreet help from Peter Mandelson. Mandelson took the codename 'Bobby' to conceal his presence and deter the kind of speculation that might have damaged the candidate's image. Blair betrayed his psychological reliance on Bobby during the leadership campaign when he was filmed running away from a reporter's questions on an industrial dispute. Having taking advice from Mandelson on a mobile phone, Blair gave the journalist a diplomatically worded reply in order to ensure the potentially damaging footage was not aired (Jones, 1995, 159-60).

The leadership race was a model of restraint and good humour by previous standards which, given the tragic circumstances, was understandable. Consequently the press played a crucial role providing informed speculation and occasional controversy. In the ballot Blair gained approximately 57% of the vote, winning a majority in each of the three parts to the electoral college. Prescott became his deputy, unseating Beckett in a reversal of the result two years before. The individual member and affiliated trade unionist majorities for the winner demonstrated the extent to which the transformation of Labour under Kinnock was more than surface deep and was a further tangible legacy of the marketing driven Policy Review. Blair's leadership was, however, founded upon a denial of this interpretation.

Relaunching the Party (Again): the Clause Four Debate.

Tony Blair's first major act as leader was to launch a debate over Clause Four. Previously he had avoided the issue and during the leadership campaign had argued:

'I don't think anyone actually wants the abolition of Clause Four to be the priority of the Labour Party at the moment. I don't think that anyone is saying now, in the run up to an election, that this is what we should focus on. The vast majority of the British people don't sit out there and debate the intricacies of the Labour Party constitution.' (On BBC1 television's *Breakfast with Frost*, broadcast 12th June 1994)

Within three months of his election Blair changed his mind by claiming the Clause's promotion of a more equitable society through public ownership was irrelevant and anachronistic. In his first Conference address as leader, he declared 'Let us say what we mean and mean what we say' yet relied on press officers to brief journalists present that this meant he intended to re-write Clause Four (Riddell, 1997). If Blair's exhortation excited some media commentators it failed to move delegates two days later when a motion reaffirming Clause Four was passed by a narrow margin. *The Guardian* headlined with 'Vote for past defies leader' and reported how the leadership had 'airily dismissed' the defeat (*The Guardian*, 8th October 1994). The next time the subject was debated at a national Labour event the agenda would be considerably more favourable to the leadership.

Many MPs including Tribune Group chair Janet Anderson backed the proposed change because there was a need to revise the organisational mission statement so as to 'market the Labour Party... with a clear message of what we stand for' (Tribune Group, 1994). Blair hoped a successful re-write would enhance his own status both within the party and without. In this he was helped by a considerable organisational effort, sympathetic media coverage, an unfocused opposition not to mention a clearly defined objective. Early MORI poll results in late January 1995 appeared to vindicate Blair's position and suggested floating voters might be more inclined to support Labour if Clause Four was re-written (*The Guardian*, 26th January 1995). This was, however, challenged by Gallup evidence two weeks later indicating 72% of voters surveyed had failed to recognise the Clause when shown it; interestingly 37% of the same sample endorsed the existing wording with 33% opposed and 28% undecided (*Daily Telegraph*, 6th February 1995). The result, whilst inconclusive, suggested public ownership could even offer Labour a profitable campaign theme as columnist Keith Waterhouse argued:

'What privatisation now means, in the public mind, is a license to print money to pay the bonanza and other jackpot benefits of chief executives. Privatisation is now private in the sense of hands off, keep out. And Tony Blair chooses this moment to tour the country persuading the brothers and sisters to ditch Clause Four. Some sense of timing.' (cited in Philo, 1995)

Most of the opinion research cited during the debate favoured the leadership's position. Giles Radice, aided by Stephen Pollard, had embarked on further focus group based analysis of key voter groups for the pamphlets *More Southern Discomfort?* and *Any Southern Comfort?* Both advocated the dropping of Clause Four (Radice and Pollard, 1993; Radice and Pollard, 1994). Research commissioned by certain trade unions

also reinforced the case for change by suggesting most members supported the proposed change (*Tribune*, 3rd March 1995). Taken with the conflicting Gallup data from the *Daily Telegraph*, the figures suggest the question was a determining factor.

Tony Blair, and his deputy John Prescott redrafted and presented the new Clause Four during March in anticipation of a specially called conference vote six weeks later. Their text made no mention of public ownership but included the phrase 'the enterprise of the market and rigour of competition'. By then 91 CLPs had declared their support for the existing Clause Four. The leadership responded by encouraging constituencies to ballot members and abandon the previously binding CLP Committee system of voting. Almost all of those who did this supported Blair (*Tribune*, 10th March 1995). The only union to hold a plebiscite was the Communications' Workers Union and it affirmed the change though, like the constituencies that balloted, did not formally choose between the new and old versions. Both *The Guardian* and *Daily Mirror* gave prominent coverage to the result. Other union executives conducted their consultation exercises through the usual constitutional devices of meetings and workplace liaisons. When Unison and the T&GWU, the two largest union affiliates, restated their commitment to the original wording, a *Daily Mirror* editorial denounced them as 'undemocratic' (*Daily Mirror*, 22nd April 1995). Similarly those Labour MEPs who declared their allegiance to Clause Four with a front-page advert in *The Guardian* on the day Blair came to address them in Strasbourg were labelled 'Stalinist' in an editorial the following day. Much was made of the leader's denunciation of those behind the advert as 'infantile incompetents' (*The Guardian*, 12th January 1995). By contrast most Westminster MPs were overwhelmingly supportive of the re-write, if only because some feared what would happen should Blair fail (Levy, 1996). The press contrived to help strengthen the leadership's case. Thus the Scottish party conference decision to support Blair made *The Guardian* front page and merited an editorial whereas the Greater London region's vote against change two weeks later received minimal coverage (*The Guardian* 11th March, and 27th March 1995). The final decision lay with a special party meeting in April 1995 that voted in favour of the new version by 66% to 34%. The leadership's management of the debate combined with a sympathetic agenda setting press had been central to an outcome that greatly benefited and reinforced Blair's position.

Conclusion.

Following the fourth defeat of 1992 Labour's new right, the self-styled 'modernisers', took care to subdue the electoral post-mortem into the wisdom of Kinnock's reform strategy. This they did through engineering an intensive and distracting debate over the party's relationship with its trade union affiliates. The new right's case was reinforced by the leaking of selective focus group material to a group of media sympathisers willing to attack the link. Thus anti-union posturing, together with the search for a new leader, dominated the party agenda in the immediate aftermath of the election. The post-mortem and debate over Labour's future was eventually resumed following Clinton's victory. Once again those pressing for reforms were well placed to use decontextualised quotes from qualitative research reports to provided journalistic contacts with 'evidence' of the need for further policy and organisation changes. In doing so the new right demonstrated and reinforced the considerable influence of the external media and marketing techniques over the party's internal affairs. The 'auxiliary institutions' of spin doctoring and focus groups had helped set the agenda in a succession of highly publicised Labour debates.

The modernisation or, perhaps more accurately, 'marketisation' of Labour ceded more autonomy over party affairs than some MPs, activists and members appreciated or wanted. Thus, by the time of the unexpected 1994 leadership election, the new right's favoured candidate Tony Blair was well placed to triumph because of his perceived popularity with the public and media. Similarly popular and journalistic opinion underpinned Blair's campaign to re-write the symbolically important Clause Four. Ultimately both victories demonstrated the enduring legacy of Kinnock's marketing driven strategy and its centrepiece Policy Review. Arguably it was the process that did most to create what eventually became known as brand 'new' Labour and the circumstances that made Blair's succession both more likely and possible. It is further contended that the rightwards drift of this project was fostered by the almost recurrent media representation of selected themes that arose in the reporting of focus group material over more than a decade and, more specifically, in the crucial period during the early 1990s. Crucially much of this commentary failed to apply the same journalistic scrutiny to findings based on qualitative work as they did to more conventional quantitative forms of research. Focus groups are unlikely to suffer in the way opinion polling did following the 1992 election. It is precisely because of this that their usage deserves all the more close examination.

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